

HUMAN FLOW

A FILM BY AI WEIWEI

Synopsis

Artist, activist and director Ai Weiwei captures the global refugee crisis - the greatest human displacement since World War II – in this breathtakingly epic film journey HUMAN FLOW. (145 minutes)

*“I want the right of life,
of the leopard at the spring, of the seed splitting open --
I want the right of the first man.”*

-- Nazim Hikmet, Turkish Poet (1902-1963)

This Crisis is Our Crisis

Imagine this: When danger comes, you and your family jettison your lives in mid-sentence, leaving behind a bombed-out home and repression at your heels. You pour all your precious savings into a passage of weeks or months—over mountains, across deserts—to jump into a flimsy rubber raft, daring to defy the ocean’s perils, chasing an unwritten future. Or you wait in suspense, journey blocked, at a closed border, in an improvised camp, fighting to never allow the barbed wire to pierce your hope. Perhaps you escape catastrophe, only to deliver yourself to a city you’ve never even imagined, to new streets crackling with fears and furies that make no sense, and even still, you are driven by the most basic human optimism, to live your life no matter what it takes.

These are not fictional situations. These are the real human faces—each lined and luminous with stories of love and courage and the urgent battle for survival—of a planet on the move, a planet in the midst of a human emergency. Much has been said in the past few years by politicians and pundits about the millions of refugees fleeing war, hunger and persecution. Yet, as debates rage about who and how many, security versus responsibility, putting up walls or building bridges, the vital truth of real people with real dreams and real needs caught in a labyrinth of uncertainty can get lost. The very word “refugee” can distance, can lull us into forgetting this major story of our times is not about statistics or abstract masses but about beating hearts, about lives-in-process, a stream of individual stories full of color, ecstasies and sorrows no different from our own.

That’s why artist Ai Weiwei foregrounds the humanity of refugees—their quest for the things we all want: safety, shelter, peace, the opportunity to be who you are—in his powerful new work of cinema: *Human Flow*. Ai, at once celebrated, persecuted and famed for an outlaw spirit that speaks directly to a world of inequality and injustice, here pushes back against the worldwide tide of fear with a defiant act of gentleness. His whole career has been about resisting borders of all kinds, about unifying art and activism. And now, with *Human Flow*, he again stretches art’s definition to include trying to change the social fabric to which his work responds.

Ai has said the crisis before us is not only the staggering number of refugees with nowhere to go right now but the temptation to turn away in a time that asks something of each of us. So he set out on a journey of his own—a simple yet epic journey to share in the daily lives of people fleeing turmoil in every corner of the planet. The result is a cinematic experience grand in scale but deeply intimate in feel. It is a fluid intermixing of poetry with hard facts, laughter with adversity, the stark with the staggeringly beautiful. Moving across 23 countries, Ai creates an immersion that invites the most personal

exploration, one that allows each viewer to consider what it’s like to live life at its most vulnerable—and to ponder what we owe to one another.

Says Ai: “As an artist, I always believe in humanity and I see this crisis as my crisis. I see those people coming down to the boats as my family. They could be my children, could be my parents, could be my brothers. I don’t see myself as any different from them. We may speak totally different languages and have totally different belief systems but I understand them. Like me, they are also afraid of the cold and don’t like standing in the rain or being hungry. Like me, they need a sense of security.”

He continues: “As a human being, I believe any crisis or hardship that happens to another human being should be as if it is happening to us. If we don’t have that kind of trust in each other, we are deeply in trouble. Then we will experience walls and division and misleading by politicians that will make for a future in the shadows.”

Ultimately, over 200 crewmembers joined the worldwide effort to make *Human Flow*.

Together, they turned the massive production into a variegated celebration of human dignity and a plea for protecting those whose everyday dreams, loves and freedoms have been trampled by tyranny, war and deprivation.

Ai has forged many large-scale art installations before. He has also directed several documentary films in China. But this project for the first time merges the sweeping planetary scope of his art with his concentrated directorial style—humanistic, rigorously questioning, rife with emotional charge—in a new way. It also merges many forms and sources of information into one—using text in counterpoise to images in counterpoise to facts in counterpoise to the pure, visceral sensations of human elation or anxiety or memory—a mix that serves as a reminder of the complexity we don’t see when we *just* read a news story or *just* look at a photograph.

Observes executive producer Andrew Cohen: “*Human Flow* is a continuation of Weiwei’s life-long work — his search for truth and understanding in any system and in any culture. Throughout his career he has interpreted the absurdity, contradictions and beauty of humanity into art that offers us fresh perspectives on our own lives. In *Human Flow* he takes us on a journey with refugees—and finds a way to offer dignity, hope and humor during a harrowing odyssey. Compassionate and empathetic, like all his work, *Human Flow* can also be seen as audacious in its breakthrough style, provocative in the way it gives voice to those without a voice, and confrontational in its wake-up call. You don’t watch this film, you experience it.”

Welcome to this evening's special screening of Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow* in the Fort Mason Chapel. Thank you for coming to see the film and joining this evening's community presentation about the global refugee crisis. We would like to express our deep appreciation to the For-Site Foundation team, Jackie, Alison, Monica and Anne-Marie for enabling us to experience *Sanctuary* and *Human Flow* together in this beautiful space. We would also like to thank Rooftop mentors Victor Yan, Mary Ann Cruz for supporting the Rooftop student field trip visit to *Sanctuary*.

On this International Women's Day, we would especially like to acknowledge two monumental women for graciously joining us this evening. Our deepest thanks to former Rooftop principal Nancy Mayeda and retired teacher Susan Sanford for share their infinite wisdom and indomitable Rooftop Spirit. This evening's program was inspired by Ms. Sanford's humanitarian work in Lesbos, Greece. She shares her experience and we hope that her first hand list of charitable organizations doing good work is useful to those looking for ways to help.

Lesbos is a lovely Greek island in the Aegean Sea. It is 20 miles from Turkey. Lesbos is one of the islands refugees try to reach on their journey to Europe. Refugees are still arriving in Greece. Currently there are 6997 refugees on Lesbos. 496 arrived during February.

I was fortunate enough to be able to volunteer for 2 1/2 months at Gekko Kids, an NGO school run by Together for Better Days in Mytilini on the island of Lesbos, Greece. The students at Gekko Kids are unaccompanied refugee minors. They were living in Moria Refugee Camp and have now been placed in group homes in Mytilini.

There are about 150 students at Gekko Kids, most of them are teenage boys from Afghanistan (I visited Afghanistan in 1972) as well as teenage refugees from Syria and Africa. The subjects taught at Gekko Kids include: Greek, English, math, art, art history, Inspirational people, yoga, guitar and drums. I taught beginning English. Student attendance, which is not mandatory, was sporadic which made teaching challenging.

It was a wonderful experience to be a part of helping these young people on their journey to a new life. They have left difficult situations in their countries of origin and their futures are very uncertain.

- SUSAN SANFORD, March 2018

Ai Weiwei's *HUMAN FLOW* <https://www.humanflow.com/>
Thursday, March 8, 2018, 6:30pm - 9pm

FOR-SITE's *Sanctuary* at Fort Mason Chapel
<https://www.for-site.org/>

Established in 2003, the FOR-SITE Foundation is dedicated to the creation, understanding, and presentation of art about place. Our exhibitions and commissions, artist residencies, and education programs are based in the belief that art can inspire fresh thinking and important dialogue about our natural and cultural environment.

ARTSED4ALL (Arts Education for Awareness and Life-long Learning) is an informal collective of educators, artists, scientists, civic institutions and community organizations, who enjoy working together to create meaningful arts experiences for all to enjoy. <https://artsed4all.blog/>

ROOFTOP ALTERNATIVE PREK-8 SCHOOL

Our challenging educational program integrates the arts to empower all students to become effective problem solvers. Rooftop's students are academically engaged and socially responsible members of the community who face challenges with optimism and confidence. We believe that when the arts are thoughtfully integrated into the academic program, students' opportunities to think critically and problem solve creatively, significantly increase. <http://rooftopk8.org/>

One Happy Family-Community Center

ohf-lesvos.org

OHF is a community center run by volunteers and refugees providing a welcoming space with activities, a school, a boutique with clothes and essentials as well as serving hot meals 6 days a week.

Dirty Girls of Lesbos

dirtygirlsoflesvos.com

Alison Terry-Evans created Dirty Girls to recycle discarded clothes, blankets and sleeping bags. She collects dirty material that are headed for landfill, has them professionally cleaned to hospital standards and donates them to people in need.

Together for Better Days

<https://www.betterdays.ngo/>

Together for Better Days created Gekko Kids for unaccompanied refugee children on Lesbos.

Home for a Day - Nikos & Katerina

<https://www.homeforaday.gr/about-us/>

Nikos and Katerina run a restaurant that serves dinner free to refugees from Moria Refugee Camp every evening.

Doctors without Borders

donate.doctorswithoutborders.org

Refugee Education and Learning International

<https://www.facebook.com/VolunteerPopUpTeachers/>

A US 501c3 registered charitable organization presently working at Gekko Kids

Sea of Solidarity

seaofsolidarity.org

Maria Tran was a child refugee from Vietnam who left Facebook to found Sea of Solidarity to address the needs of refugees at landing sites and refugee camps on Lesbos.